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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/11/15/the-middle-east-is-now-all-about-putin/print/>

## The Middle East is Now All About Putin

By Robert Fisk  
November 15, 2016

Predictable claptrap is being uttered about Trump and the Middle East. How can the Muslim world deal with a man who is an Islamophobe? For that is indeed what Trump is. He is a disgrace to his country and to his people – who, heavens above, elected the chap.

But here's a mollifying thought. US prestige in the region has fallen so low, the Arab world's belief (and quite possibly the Israeli belief) in American power so shattered by Washington's stupidity and ineptness, that I rather suspect little attention will be paid to Donald Trump.

I'm not quite sure when respect for American governance began to collapse. It was certainly at its height when Eisenhower told the British, French and Israelis to get out of the Suez Canal in 1956. Maybe Ronald Reagan mixing up his cue cards and taking his presidency into the early stages of Alzheimer's had a larger effect than we thought. I did once meet a Norwegian diplomat who sat down to talk to Reagan about Israel and Palestine and found the old boy quoting from a paper on the US economy. Bill Clinton's Middle East "peace" couldn't have helped.

I guess it was George W Bush, who decided to attack Afghanistan even though no Afghan had ever attacked the United States, and who created a Shia Muslim state in Iraq out of a Sunni Muslim state – much to Saudi Arabia's disgust – who did more harm than most US presidents to date. The Saudis (from whom came 15 of the 19 killers involved in 9/11) launched their war on Yemen with scarcely a whiff of concern from Washington.

And Obama seems to have goofed every time in the Middle East. His “handshake” to Islam in Cairo, his Nobel Prize (for public speaking), his “red line” in Syria – which disappeared in the sand the moment he was rescued by the Russkis – is best forgotten. It’s Vladimir Putin’s Sukhois and Migs that are setting the pace in the terrible Syrian war. And amid lands where human rights count not a jot for most of the regional dictators, there’s been hardly a whimper about the Kremlin. Putin was even taken to the opera in Cairo by Field Marshal President al-Sisi.

And that’s the point. Putin talks and acts. Actually, in translation at least, he’s not terribly eloquent, more businessman than politician. Trump talks. But can he act? Cast aside the odd relationship which Trump thinks he has with Putin. It’s Trump who is going to need a translation of Putin’s words, not the other way round. In fact, the Arabs and Israelis, I think, will be spending far more time during the Trump presidency listening to Putin. For the fact is that the Americans have proved themselves as unreliable and fickle in the Middle East as Britain was in the 1930s.

Even America’s blitz on Isis didn’t really get under way until Putin sent his own fighter-bombers to Syria – at which point, many Arabs were asking why Washington hadn’t managed to destroy the cult. Go back to the Arab revolutions – or “spring”, as the Americans pathetically called it – and you see Obama and his hapless Secretary of State (yes, Hillary) goofing again, failing to realise that this massive public awakening in the Arab world was real and that the dictators were going to go (most of them, at least). In Cairo in 2011, about the only decision taken by Obama was to evacuate US citizens from the Egyptian capital.

It is easy to say that the Arabs are appalled that an Islamophobe has won the White House. But did they think Obama or any of his predecessors – Democrat or Republican – had any special concern for Islam? US foreign policy in the Middle East has been a spectacular series of wars and air raids and retreats. Russian policy – in the Yemen war during Nasser’s age and in Afghanistan – has been destructive enough, but the post-Soviet state seemed to have curled its claws until Putin moved his men into Syria.

No doubt we’ll see Trump turn up in the Middle East before long, to fawn before the Israelis and repeat America’s uncritical support for the Israeli state, and to assure the wealthy Gulf autocrats that their stability is assured. What he says about Syria will, of course, be fascinating, given his views on Putin. But maybe, he will just leave the region to his minions, to secretaries of state and vice-presidents who will have to second guess what the guy really thinks. And that, of course, is where we all stand now. What does Trump think? Or, more to the point, does he think?